

Day three: President Karzai, The Soldiers and The Hooch

Kabul, Afghanistan:

We arrived in Kabul, Afghanistan by C-130 cargo plane and made our way through this war-torn city, teeming with people, barricades and barbed wire, and made our way to the immense presidential palace of President Hamid Karzai. Our delegation was the first to meet with the President since his inauguration this past Tuesday and we expected him to be brief and tired from the ordeal of the past week. How wrong we were! After being escorted into his private office, we were greeted by an affable and humorous man who was anxious to see us and express his gratitude and appreciation for the efforts of the United States of America.

President Karzai said again and again, "Please congratulate the people of the United States on our success. We see our success as your success." He also repeatedly made the point that, "the people of Afghanistan love the American people and want the United States here." President Karzai is his nation's "indispensable man" and when speaking with him, one is left with the indelible sense that Afghanistan will succeed largely because this gracious, intelligent and humble man is leading it.

From the presidential palace we motorcaded to Camp Phoenix where over 1000 Hoosier Army National Guard are stationed. General Morehead greeted us at the base headquarters and explained the crucial role that Hoosiers are playing in training the Afghan National Army and supporting the Reconstruction efforts around the country. Our visit was official but, thanks to 25,000 Hoosiers who took time to send holiday cards as part of our "Operation Holiday Greeting," it was also deeply personal.

As soon as our briefing ended, Congressman Chris Chocoma and I went to work lugging several heavy boxes of greeting cards to a table in the main courtyard. Our entire delegation went to work passing out greeting cards to waiting troops in the courtyard and the mess hall and the response was moving. Time after time, tired-looking soldiers' faces would brighten as we repeated, "25,000 in two weeks" and, "people back in Indiana are grateful." The common reply was often a humble, "Really? They really know what we're doing?" One soldier was deeply moved as he opened a greeting card from a child and a one-dollar bill fell out! I told almost all the soldiers I met of my conversation with President Bush last Monday at the White House. When I told him that I was going to Afghanistan and that almost 15 percent of the National Guard there were Hoosiers, the President replied, "That's why it's goin' so well!" They loved it!

To all of you who took the time to support Operation Holiday Greeting at your school or church or senior center or on your own kitchen table, mission accomplished! I think we touched hearts and I couldn't be more grateful for what each of you took time to do.

From Camp Phoenix we took a roller coaster helicopter ride on a CH-53 Super Stallion through the mountains around Jalalabad and touched down in the rain at the Provision Reconstruction Team manned by American personnel in Jalalabad. There we learned from Hoosier Lt. Colonel Edward Jordan of the role our Indiana troops are playing in standing up the Afghan Army and aiding the local population with elections and basic human services. We made our way to a

school at the base and were surrounded by hundreds of 9-year-old boys anxious to try out their english language skills and shake hands. The children got to me the most. Seeing what our troops are bringing to these beautiful little children in food, clothing and education is, as I said so many times to soldiers, "the Lord's work." I also met many members of the Afghan Army and saw the genuine camaraderie between U.S. and Afghan forces. The affection between both was real and moving. We are forging real and lasting ties at the ground level and Hoosiers are making the difference.

The day ended with briefings at the command headquarters in Kabul with our delegation being given keys to our individual hooches. A hooch, as I came to learn, is the standard base accommodation here at the embassy compound and is comprised of about an 8-foot by 15-foot room with bed, sink, toilet and shower. We walked to our quarters with the three Star General, General Barno, who runs the theatre of operations...he went to his hooch, we went to ours.

We were told that we are the first congressional delegation to be permitted to overnight here in Afghanistan since the start of the war and one of a very few members of Congress to ever be permitted to spend the night with the troops in a combat area and we all felt a great sense of privilege to be able, for just 24 hours, to identify with the brave men and women who serve here under the flag of the United States. Thank you for the privilege of representing you here. Afghanistan is succeeding only because the finest troops in the world, many from Indiana, are here making it possible for these good people.

Rep. Mike Pence, Embassy Compound, Kabul, Afghanistan